

Paul Dooley Project Part 2- HEALTH (1980)

TV STORE ONLINE: You wrote the screenplay for *Health* (1979) with Robert Altman. How did that collaboration come to fruition?

DOOLEY: Well it's a interesting story. Robert Altman was a gambler. He gambled on the horses and on basketball games but that's not what I'm talking about. He also gambled on his career too. He liked to try things that he had never tried before and he liked to gamble on his casting as well. He first saw me in a play called *Hold Me*, which was based on a series of Jules Pfeiffer comic strips. Then Altman cast me in his film, *A WEDDING* (1978) where my wife was Carol Burnett. At the time I told my wife, "If I don't do anything wrong Altman will probably put me in a bunch of his movies." If Altman liked an actor he would use them over and over in many of his films. That happened to actors Keith Carradine and Shelley Duvall. As we were finishing up the shooting of *A WEDDING*, Altman cast me in the lead in his next film -- A romantic comedy called *PERFECT COUPLE* (1979). It was strange for me because I had played only character parts before that and while they were most comic parts there was never anything romantic. So *PERFECT COUPLE* was one of the only times in my career that I had a lead role.

After we finished that up he told me that he wanted to make a film about the health industry. He told me that he was going to put me in that and that he'd be in touch when he was ready to start. I didn't hear from him for a while and then one day he calls me and tells me that he has this script that he's sending me and he wants me to re-write the screenplay. I said, "Bob I've never written a screenplay." He said, "You'll be alright." That's the way he was too. Once he worked with you once he could figure out what else you could do. By this time I had already written for *The Electric Company* and then also several comedy bits of my own earlier on.

Just before I started re-writing the script, Altman told me that the only restriction I had was that I couldn't eliminate any of the characters in the first draft because he had already cast some of the actors. But he told I could change any aspect of the story that I wanted to. A couple days passed and he called me and said, "What do you got?" I said, "Not much. I've only got like six pages done." He told me to send it to him, and then a couple days later he asked me the same thing and I told him that I had a few more pages done and he asked me to send those to him.

After a while of this I figured out why this was happening....When he was planning *A WEDDING* for 20th Century Fox he had secured a five picture deal with the studio. When it came time to shoot *HEALTH* Altman turned in this script to the studio and they hated it. They told him that the script was awful and that they were pulling the plug on the film. Fox had given him up front money for *HEALTH* and he had already secured his location for the shoot in Florida and he had hired actors. So Altman said to them, "The script is just a roadmap. You know how I work. I'll work with the actors once we start shooting." The studio told Altman that the script was so awful

that it wasn't even usable as a roadmap and before they would green-light it, the script would have to be re-written. He responded to that with, "It's already being re-written by Paul Dooley." Now Fox didn't know anything about me! They were in the final stages of editing *A PERFECT COUPLE* and I think they liked my work and thought that the film was going to be a hit because when Altman told them that I was re-writing the script they told him that he could go ahead and make the film. They never asked him if I had written anything before as far as I know.

By the time I finished like forty or fifty pages of the script Altman called me and said, "You can stop writing...The studio has given me the rest of the money." Then he told me the whole backstory just as I've now told it and then we and the guy who wrote the original draft of the script Frank Barhydt went down in Florida to make the film and we wrote the rest of script there and we made some of it up as we were going along too.

TV STORE ONLINE: So how much of the final film is your contribution to the screenplay?

DOOLEY: He didn't use a lot of what I wrote. He already had his own ideas for the story and once the studio gave him the freedom to make the film he cut out a lot of what I had written. I'd say that no more than a third of the film is my contribution. There's some dialogue that I wrote that is still in there and some character traits stuff.

TV STORE ONLINE: Example?

DOOLEY: There is that bit where all of the lights go out in the rooms but you see it happen from the exterior of the hotel. It was almost like a *Waltons* parody. Like when all of the kids on that show would say, "Goodnight John Boy..." In the sequence you see all of the characters and their bedroom rituals just before they turn the lights out in their rooms. So I wrote three of the characters rituals. I wrote Lauren Bacall's bedroom ritual where she takes all of these pills one-by-one. I wrote James Garner's bedroom ritual where you see him putting out a joint in an ashtray. I wrote Dick Cavett's bedtime ritual too. The joke behind Dick Cavett's ritual was that before he had his own talk show on ABC he used to be a writer for Johnny Carson and so when you see Dick in the film he's laying in bed with a tall glass of milk next to him on the nightstand and he's watching *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. I thought it would be really funny if at night Dick would still watch his idol on television. Well Altman cut the first two with Bacall and Garner from the script and kept the Cavett one. It got a pretty big laugh when the film was released. I wrote the scene with Henry Gibson where he gets into womens clothing as well.

TV STORE ONLINE: I love your character in HEALTH...

DOOLEY: He was the third party candidate who was running against Lauren Bacall and Glenda Jackson. He was the guy that would've been the pig farmer that decided

to become a politician. My idea for HEALTH was that everything comes from the ocean. So Altman just said, "Take this guy and make up his whole campaign. We'll print up buttons and banners and flyers." His name in the script was "Harold Gainey" so I nicknamed him "Gill" because that sounded like something that was from the ocean. I had him putting out a product called "Vita Sea." All he talked about was the ocean and the good stuff that came from it but he was total idiot...

TV STORE ONLINE: And he hated women too!

DOOLEY: Yeah, he was just a jerk all the way around. They you see him at the bottom of the hotel's swimming pool and people think he's drowning and when he comes up he had a oxygen tank strapped to his leg. He was a total publicity hound. I was walking on the beach during the pre-production one day and I had a daydream about what Gill should look like. I saw him with that blonde streak in his hair. I called it "The Wave Of The Future" because of the ocean and when I told Altman about it he told me to try it out in make-up and see how it looked. That's the thing about Altman he really gave everyone so much freedom to work.

TV STORE ONLINE: When the film came out it was savaged by the American film critics....

DOOLEY: Right, no one liked the film.

TV STORE ONLINE: Right, but one of the most poignant ideas made by the critics about the film was that HEALTH was a "satire about something that was already a satire".....

DOOLEY: Yeah, I think that's true.

TV STORE ONLINE: Creating something like that character in HEALTH and then being part of the film itself...When a film receives across the board....Does it feel in the post-mordem like everything you've done has been in vain in a way?

DOOLEY: No...I don't find anything in vain. One thing I learned from Robert Altman is that you should never fall in love with the work you've done but only the process involved in creating and making it. Altman said to me once late at night when we were working, "Don't fall in love with any of the scenes we've just shot. Don't even fall in love with this movie. I don't know if I'm going to cut your scenes. Your best scenes might end up on the cutting room floor if they don't help move the plot. I don't even know if this film will get distribution. It's all a crap-shoot!" Ultimately...it doesn't matter if critics liked it or not because what makes it wonderful was the process of making it and the relationships that all of us formed during it.

TV STORE ONLINE: The reviews for HEALTH that were written by American film critics are pretty funny to read...

DOOLEY: Every review of every Robert Altman movie ever always has the first half of the review to mention his hits like M.A.S.H. (1970) and NASHVILLE (1975) and how he became a filmmaker and auteur. Then they'd spend the rest of the review mentioning the story line of the movie and then the reviews always finished out with "Featuring a stellar cast that includes..."

TV STORE ONLINE: **HEALTH has such a frantic pacing to it. When you watch it you can't seem to catch your breath after the first few minutes of it. That swimming pool sequence is just insane...**

DOOLEY: Laughing...That was fun. There are lot of great moments in the film like that.

TV STORE ONLINE: **How long was the shoot for the film?**

DOOLEY: The shoot was scheduled for eight weeks but we only shot for seven weeks. I asked him why we were leaving early and he said, "Ah...We got enough. Let's go."

TV STORE ONLINE: **Was the collaborative process different in that you'd worked with Altman on A WEDDING and A PERFECT COUPLE as an actor and with HEALTH you were not only the actor but the co-writer?**

DOOLEY: Well, we would first of all shoot during the day then go away for 90 minutes for dinner then come back and watch the dailies. After we finished watching the dailies we'd talk about what we needed to shot the next day. It was myself, Altman, his editor and cameraman and we'd just start talking. It wasn't like we'd go off and sit down at a typewriter together. We'd have a group meeting. It was very open and spontaneous.

TV STORE ONLINE: **What's next for you? What are you working on?**

DOOLEY: I'm working on a one man show now. I've actually been working on over the last ten years but recently have been working on it seriously. It's about how I went from a twelve year old kid who loved comedy and comedians because an actor and sometimes comedian. It's gonna have some film clips in it, and also some of the short comedy films that I've made and some comic routines as well.

